**Music in the Civil Rights Movement[[1]](#footnote-1)**

by Bernice Johnson Reagon

**How to Think of Freedom Songs**

One of the first things that's important when you think about freedom songs and the Civil Rights Movement is to not actually think of freedom songs as if they were created strategically by the Movement. Like the collective breath of the Movement, they were a natural outpouring, evidencing the life force of the fight for freedom.

…These people belonged to a culture that had a very high place for music that they themselves created as a part of their daily lives.

**Masses of People Speaking Through Song**

…These songs are very important in capturing the culture. News reports covering the Movement always used the singing as a way of trying to tell the story of the power of what was going on. So when you talk about the culture of the Movement, it is important that you draw from the rich music database. If you draw indiscriminately, you miss the opportunity to tell a much more detailed, articulate story that comes from the collective voice of the people whose participation created and sustained the mass mobilization campaigns.

**The Impact of Freedom Singing**

There is a story of a policeman beating a demonstrator on the ground and the man being assaulted began to sing, "[We Shall Overcome](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/story/08_washington.html#music)," and this particular policeman could not continue the beating. This did not happen in every case, however. People who were against the Movement had strong reactions when faced with powerful, solid freedom singing. And the singing was essential to those of us involved in the action, it was galvanizing, it pulled us together, it helped us to handle fear and anger. I am talking about full and rich singing, when people are singing at full power. When the song started you usually had at least three-part harmony and the sound filled the air -- it was powerful music, the freedom songs.

**Singing in the Face of Danger**

… In those environments you understood the tension and the danger of what local people did who were active in the Movement. Songs raised in those moments served to hold everybody, helping to manage the tension that came when the sheriff and deputies came to see who from the community was in that mass meeting.

There was a very strong "stay away" feeling about the law. The law was not there to protect you. The law was a danger to you. Just their physical presence would create a chill. And the singing helped you to navigate that energy inside of your body. I'm talking about sound moving through your body and helping you to breathe through that tension. It's very important not to suggest that singing made fear disappear. Because you really knew the danger, and that did not go anywhere. But singing could help you to stay and hold your stance.

**Express Yourself**

It doesn't matter to me if you write song lyrics, poetry, or prose -- if you are concerned about what's happening in your world, and especially if you take issue with it, songs, poetry and short stories are very important ways to express what you are feeling.

…We were young people and it was important to us to have songs that named what we saw in our world, and what we wanted to happen with what we saw.



**Mississippi Freedom Summer Volunteers singing “We Shall Overcome,” 1964[[2]](#footnote-2)**

**“In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement….I have stood in a meeting with hundreds of youngsters and joined in while they sang, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round.” It is not just a song; it is a resolve. A few minutes later, I have seen those same youngsters refuse to turn around before a pugnacious Bull Conner in command of men armed with powerful hoses. These songs bind us together, give us courage together, help us to march together.” -- Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*, 1964[[3]](#footnote-3)**

**“So you had all those things to go up against, the fear of being arrested, of going to jail, and on those first sit-ins, I had a certain amount of fear what might happen. I’ll never forget on February the twenty-ninth, when a group of us went downtown, and it was snow that day in Nashville, and some people had been beaten up, and the local police in Nashville stared arresting people. And we went to jail by the hundreds, singing “We Shall Overcome,” and it was a fantastic, just a moving thing. I will never forget it. You had the fear, but you had to go on in spite of that, because you felt that you were doing something that *had* to be done, and in the process maybe you would make a contribution toward ending the system of segregation.” – John Lewis, “Leaving Pike County”[[4]](#footnote-4)**

**Lesson Plan: Music and the Civil Rights Movement DBQ**

Created by: Lou Kindschi, Susan Daniel, Diana Rahm, Irina Lisnyak, John Billman, Molly Beard

**Objective:** How and in what ways did music affect the Civil Rights Movement?

**Grade Level:** 9-12th

**Subjects:** Social Studies/English

**Lesson Duration:** 1-2 class periods

**Resources Needed:** video streaming, online resources, primary documents included

**Bell Ringer:** Take a few moments to reflect upon a time when you sang a song with others and the experience moved you. Answer the following questions:

1. What was the song?
2. What was the setting?
3. Who sang with you?
4. Why did it affect you?

Share your experiences (pair-share or small groups). After students have shared their experiences in small groups, then ask the class, as a whole, if they found any factors in common.

**Lesson Introduction:** After the bell ringer discussion, read passage below, then continue the lesson using the directions after the quote:

“The Civil Rights Movement is replete with moments that would scare any human being. Moments when movement leaders and foot soldiers were facing angry whites who had guns, fire hoses, and a law that supported white power over the basic human rights of black people. It was in these moments that the power of song can best be seen. When people’s spirits were low, song likes, “Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” picked them back up. The Freedom Singers were key to this phenomenon in the Civil Rights Movement.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Directions:**

1. Pass out lyrics to “We Shall Overcome” and “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” to students. Read the lyrics and listen to both songs. To access the lyrics and audio recordings to these songs, go to the following website:
   1. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/resources/res_audio.html>
   2. <http://www.k-state.org/english/nelp/american.studies.s98/we.shall.overcome.html>
   3. http://www.songsforteaching.com/folk/aintgonnaletnobodyturnmearound.php
2. Have students analyze songs by using the “Thinking About Songs As Historical Artifacts” worksheet created by the Library of Congress. (to access worksheet, go to [www.loc.gov/teachers/lyrical](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/lyrical))
3. As a class, discuss responses written on the worksheet.
4. Then, provide students with the primary source documents included in this lesson plan and have students analyze these documents individually. (If needed, the following primary source video can be used as an option: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpbfM7pojWU)
5. Have students complete a DBQ essay answering the following question:
   1. “To what extent was the power of music a force in the Civil Rights Movement? Use the documents and your knowledge of the period to support your answer.”
6. The essay will serve as the lesson plan assessment.

**Lesson Extension Options:**

1. Students can write their own protest song about a contemporary issue in society.
2. Students could research and analyze current protest songs.

1. Reagon, Bernice Johnson. Interview by Maria Daniels, WGBH Boston, July 2006. Available from the World Wide Web: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/reflect/r03\_music.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/freedom-summer-june-august-1964 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. King, Martin Luther, Jr. qtd. *In A Walk to Freedom: The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, 1956-1964.* Marjorie L. White. Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Historical Society, 1998. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lewis, John qtd. In “Leaving Pike County.” *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered.*  Howell Raines. New York: Penguin, 1977. 97-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “The Annointed Freedom Singers.” *Remember Bloody Sunday and the Voting Rights Struggle Souvenir History Book.* Montgomery, AL: The National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, N.D. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)